

FRIENDLY COMPETITORS: A SPORTING CHANCE

Serious sport has nothing to do with fair play," wrote the British author George Orwell. "It is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules, and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence."

Of course, sports enthusiasts are sure to disagree with Orwell. They will insist that fair play is, indeed, what sports are all about. After all, the word "sportsmanship" has come to signify some of the noblest qualities of the human spirit. These include grace in defeat, generosity in victory, and respect for one's opponent.

"Friendly competition," many people call it. But does this catchphrase really make sense? Isn't "friendly competition" a bit of a contradiction in terms?

Many of today's sports show telltale signs of a violent ancestry. In soccer, rugby, and American-style football, teams of players vie for territory in a manner suggestive of warfare. And can there be any doubt that wrestling and boxing are descended from more lethal forms of one-on-one combat?

How completely have such sports subdued their violent origins? The rules of football are periodically revised to keep players from causing one another harm, but players are routinely injured anyway. And boxing, praised for its emphasis on speed, grace, and skill, sometimes results in brain damage and death.

Even sports in which competitors make no physical contact can prove dangerous. In their determination to win at any cost, runners and gymnasts sometimes subject themselves to brutal regimens, dangerous substances, and unhealthy diets.

Indeed, the world of sports shows its dark side all too often. Brawls erupt among the players on the field, riots among the spectators in the stands. "I went to a fight the other day," a standup comedian once remarked, "and a hockey game broke out!"

So when we talk about friendly competition, are we only kidding ourselves? Does sportsmanship merely disguise destructiveness and aggression? Happily, many great stories from myth and folklore hint otherwise.

According to ancient Babylonian myth, King Gilgamesh of Uruk was a cruel king who caused his subjects untold misery. Then one day, a savage named Enkidu came from the forest and challenged the mighty Gilgamesh to a wrestling match. Although Gilgamesh narrowly won, he was so humbled by his opponent's valor and prowess that he became a wise and caring ruler. And he and Enkidu remained inseparable friends.

There is a similar legend about the fabled outlaw Robin Hood. In Sherwood Forest, Robin once met a burly stranger who challenged him to a fight. This time, the stranger won, knocking Robin headlong into a stream. Robin then befriended the stranger, nicknaming him "Little John."

And classical mythology tells of the beautiful, swift-footed huntress Atalanta, who refused to marry any man who couldn't outrun her in a race. She remained undefeated until a young man named Hippomenes challenged her. He won the race by dropping golden apples in Atalanta's path, distracting her attention. Atalanta happily married him. (Sports purists may object to Hippomenes' tactics. But the race, as they say, is not always to the swift—and Atalanta herself seems to have admired Hippomenes' cleverness.)

Gilgamesh, Robin Hood, and Atalanta all learned something about their own strengths and limitations from their challengers. Robin Hood and Atalanta could have skulked away bitterly in defeat, and Gilgamesh could have killed the defeated Enkidu. Instead, they had the good sense to befriend their challengers—the very people most able to keep them up to the mark. Friendly competition might not always be a reality in sports. But it is always an option. All it needs is a sporting chance.